

Testimony Regarding

Governor's H.B. No. 7027: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH 2019, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR Education Cost Sharing, Special Education, and Teacher Pension Funding

Michelle Embree Ku

Senator Formica, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and Distinguished Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for taking the time to hear the testimony from the public regarding public education in the budget.

First, I want to acknowledge the need to re-evaluate our educational funding system, and I appreciate the added support of 10 million dollars to special education in the state budget. But I also want you to know that assigning 1/3 of the responsibility to fund teacher pensions to districts seems arbitrary and unfair, and as proposed, the budget would be devastating to our community.

Having served 3 ½ years on the Newtown Board of Education, I want to share with you how I see this budget playing out in Newtown.

According to the Governor's budget proposal, Newtown schools will have a 6.8 million dollar gap in a 74 million dollar budget. This gap is based on changes to the Education Cost Sharing distribution, special education funding and contributions to the teacher pension fund. To make up for this, our locally elected officials would have three options – use savings, increase taxes or cut services.

- First, by using savings, in one fell swoop, the Board of Education alone would reduce the Town fund balance by 2/3, the rub being that this is not a one year issue. Newtown would be in the same boat next year. Within two years the fund balance would be decimated.
- Second, assuming the town knew about the budget gap before our town referendum, the Board of Education budget could be increased above the current proposed increase. Given a long history in our community of up to five referenda to pass a budget and an average increase of about 1.4% over the last 8 years, a 9-11% increase is not in the realm of possibility.

Let me share with you our record for passing education budget referenda in Newtown:

Year	# of Referenda to Pass	Resulting Increase in Budget
2009	1	0.4%
2010	3	1.3%
2011	4	1.2%
2012	5	0.6%
2013*	3	3.9%
2014	1	0.4%
2015	1	0.3%
2016**	1	2.9%

*implementation of full day kindergarten and increased security and mental health supports

**Federal security and mental health grants reduced

What remains consistent is that every year, there is pressure to reduce costs equal to decreasing enrollment, keep up with extensive state mandates and maintain some of our unique mental health supports and security measures. In Newtown, like many rural towns, we have a small commercial tax base – about 8% - and residents bear most of the tax bill. In a town where tax payers directly vote on the budget in a referendum – similar to many towns in Connecticut – the state’s imposed tax would almost certainly be rejected.

- Third, the Board of Education could cut 9% of the budget. In a district that falls below the state average for per pupil spending, and which, until the Sandy Hook School shooting, fell in the bottom 15% of the state for per pupil spending, tell me how you would cut 9% of the district budget? Where would you find 6.8 million dollars in a budget that is largely driven by contractual obligations? What would a reduction of almost 10% of the staff in your home district do? What would your class sizes be? How would your administrators continue to comply with the many mandates? And how would you maintain your buildings and infrastructure? I ask each of you – regardless of whether or not your town or city is affected similarly by this budget - to have that conversation with your Superintendents.

I want to leave you with several questions. How will this budget lift up communities while preserving the others? How will this proposal support or maintain a crown jewel of our state - education? How will this encourage people to choose to work and live here? What will happen to education if some districts are devastated by the resulting funding gap and the vast majority of the remaining districts lose support from the state? And, finally, how would this affect our state’s economy over the long term?

Thank you for your time,

Michelle Embree Ku

Newtown, CT